

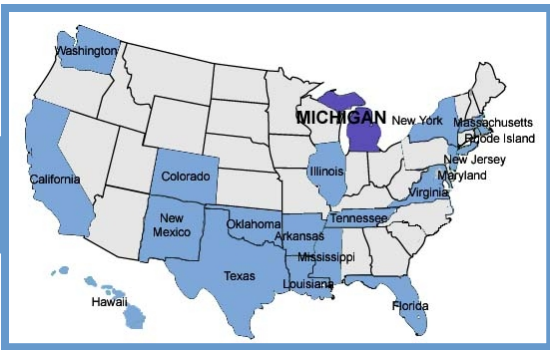
**National Center for
Educational
Accountability**

national sponsor of Just  for the Kids

Just for the Kids, Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2007

Barkell Elementary School, Hancock Public Schools
Coolidge Elementary School, Flint Community Schools
Godfrey Elementary School, Godfrey-Lee Public Schools
New Era Elementary School, Shelby Public Schools
Pierce Elementary School, Flint Community Schools

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Just for the Kids, Michigan

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2007

The Institute

The 2006 Michigan Best Practice Institute continued a process begun in 2005 as part of a larger national research study to investigate the practices of schools that consistently outperformed their peers. Research teams studied schools in 20 states to identify key practices of consistently higher performing schools in a variety of policy contexts.

As in 2005, researchers studied five consistently higher performing elementary schools in Michigan to learn how they had attained and sustained their level of higher performance. Schools were identified through an in-depth analysis of academic achievement developed by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) using data publicly available from the state.

The 2006 Michigan Best Practice Institute was sponsored by Just for the Kids-Michigan affiliate (JFTK-MI) and received additional funding from the Daimler-Chrysler Foundation. JFTK-MI is a partnership of the Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence and the National Center for Educational Accountability.

The Summary

A research team conducted a day-long series of focus groups with teachers, principals, and district administrators to study the classroom-, school-, and district-level practices contributing to each school's success. NCEA's Best Practice Framework provided the structure for each focus group. NCEA analyzed transcripts of the focus groups to prepare this summary report. This report presents a brief description of each higher performing school, followed by the Best Practice Institute Findings in Michigan.

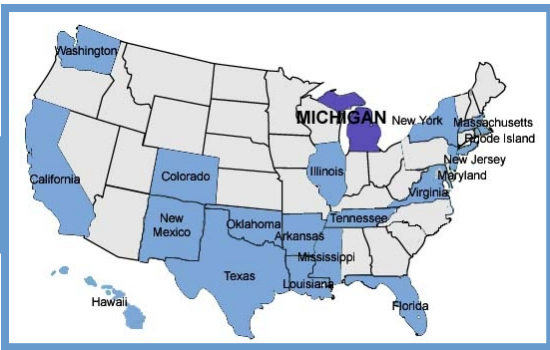
The School Identification Process

NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the Michigan Department of Education to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in all tested subject areas in the 2003-04 (Spring 2004), 2004-2005 (Fall 2005), and 2005-2006 (Fall 2006)¹ school years: mathematics, English Language Arts, science, and social studies. The analysis included data from the third- through sixth-grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP).

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (mathematics, English Language Arts, science, and social studies) and year (Spring 2004, Fall 2005, and Fall 2006) to learn how schools compared to their demographic peers with respect to both performance and consistency. To assess performance, NCEA examined each school's average of the percentage of students meeting the "Met" and "Exceeded" standards on the state exam in each subject with the exception of social studies, which used only the "Met" standards.² A Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analysis then compared each school's percent of students meeting the standard with the percent that was "predicted" or "typical" for a school in the state with the same demographics. The demographic and other variables used in this analysis were each school's percentage of low-income, African American, Hispanic, and Asian students; the size of the school, and the school's "magnet" status. Normally, NCEA also prefers to take students' prior year test scores and length of enrollment in the same school into account, but that longitudinal information was not available in Michigan. The results of this analysis within each subject are comparative performance measures for each tested grade and year for 2004-2006, as well as an average measure across all three years.

¹ Beginning in 2005-06, the MEAP was administered in the Fall. The 2005-06 and 2006-07 data are actually from the Fall 2005 and Fall 2006 MEAP assessments but essentially measure the learning of the previous school year.

² This formula translates to a school receiving one point for any student who "Met" the standard and two points for any student who also "Exceeded" the standard.



Just for the Kids, Michigan

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2007

Consistency was measured within each subject by examining the range of these performance measures across grades and years. Schools whose performance varied less across grades and years were considered more consistent. Since the Institute intended to learn from consistently higher performing schools, schools eligible to participate had to meet performance and consistency criteria in at least three of the four tested subjects: mathematics, English Language Arts, science, and social studies. Within the set of schools that met these criteria, consideration was also given to urban/rural status, size, and geographic location to ensure diversity among participating schools.

The Higher Performing Schools Studied

School	District	2006 School Enrollment		2006 School-Wide Demographics						
		Grade Span	No. of Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian	Native American	Other	Low Income
Barkell Elementary School	Hancock Public Schools	K-5	404	0.0%	0.7%	98.0%	0.5%	0.7%	0.1%	55.7%
Coolidge Elementary School	Flint Community Schools	K-6	412	87.1%	1.5%	10.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	75.4%
Godfrey Elementary School	Godfrey-Lee Public Schools	3-5	312	16.0%	54.8%	27.9%	0.3%	1.0%	0.0%	84.9%
New Era Elementary School	Shelby Public Schools	K-5	138	4.3%	17.4%	76.8%	1.4%	0.0%	0.1%	54.1%
Pierce Elementary School	Flint Community Schools	K-6	534	78.7%	3.0%	17.4%	0.2%	0.7%	0.0%	66.5%



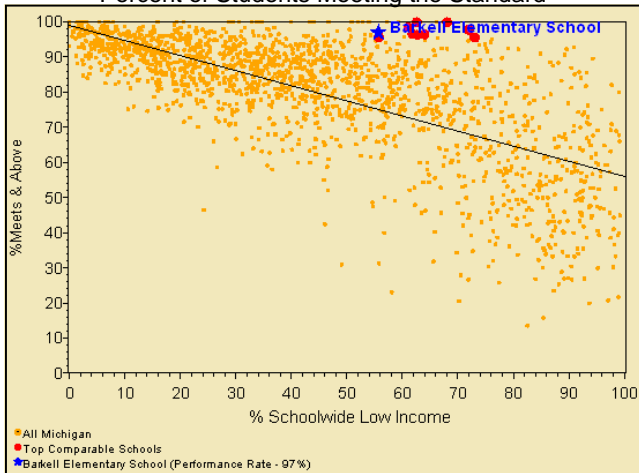
Barkell Elementary School Hancock Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

The School

Barkell Elementary School, which serves 404 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is the only elementary school in the Hancock Public Schools (924 students). Barkell's student population is 98.0% White, 0.7% Hispanic, 0.7% Native American, 0.5% Asian, and 0.1% other. Within this student population, 55.7% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Example: 2006 4th Grade Mathematics
Percent of Students Meeting the Standard



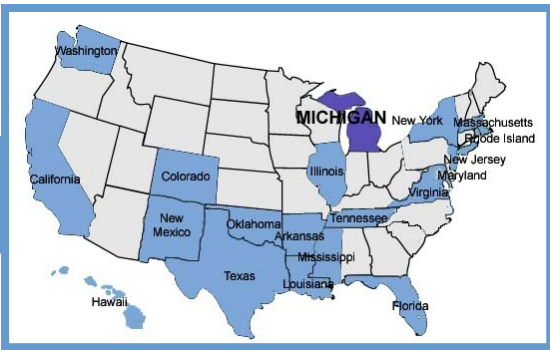
Consistent Higher Performance

Barkell Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all three tested subject areas: English Language Arts, mathematics, and science. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from Spring 2004 to Fall 2006.

MEAP Performance Trends for Students Exceeding Standards

The scatterplot above shows Barkell's performance relative to the state based on the percentage of students meeting the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. The Performance Rates listed below are the percentage of students exceeding the standard.

Subject	Spring 2004 Performance		Fall 2005 Performance			Fall 2006 Performance		
	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
English Language Arts	0.0	N/A	23.9	6.0	12.9	35.5	14.5	22.7
Mathematics	26.7	N/A	68.7	62.7	23.4	71.0	37.1	60.6
Science	N/A	51.5	N/A	N/A	39.1	N/A	N/A	59.1



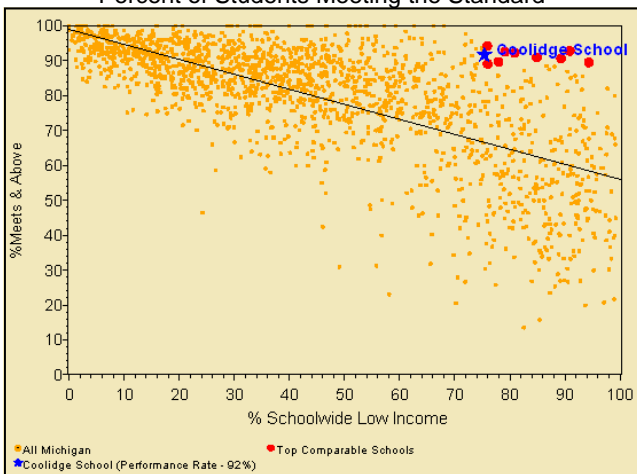
Coolidge Elementary School Flint Community Schools

Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

The School

Coolidge Elementary School, which serves 412 kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is 1 of 25 elementary schools in the Flint Community Schools (18,081 students). Coolidge's student population is 87.1% African American, 10.4% White, 1.5% Hispanic, and 1.0% other. Within this student population, 75.4% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Example: 2006 4th Grade Mathematics
Percent of Students Meeting the Standard



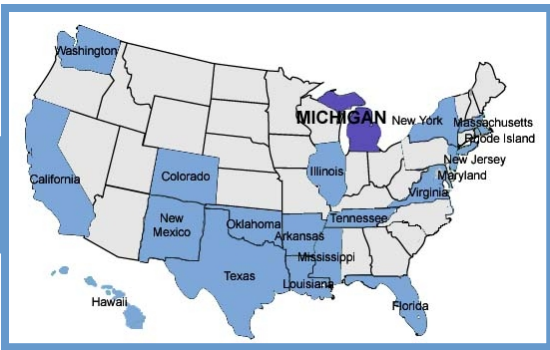
Consistent Higher Performance

Coolidge Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all tested subject areas: English Language Arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The analysis included all third- through sixth-grade achievement data from Spring 2004 to Fall 2006.

MEAP Performance Trends for Students Exceeding Standards

The scatterplot above shows Coolidge's performance relative to the state based on the percentage of students meeting the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. The Performance Rates listed below are the percentage of students exceeding the standard.

Subject	Spring 2004 Performance		Fall 2005 Performance				Fall 2006 Performance			
	4	5	3	4	5	6	3	4	5	6
English Language Arts	4.3	N/A	8.5	1.7	12.3	14.9	7.9	3.3	13.0	14.3
Mathematics	39.1	N/A	45.1	26.7	40.4	17.9	47.4	21.3	48.1	36.7
Science	N/A	52.0	N/A	N/A	16.1	N/A	N/A	N/A	31.5	N/A
Social Studies	N/A	8.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	37.3	N/A	N/A	N/A	49.0



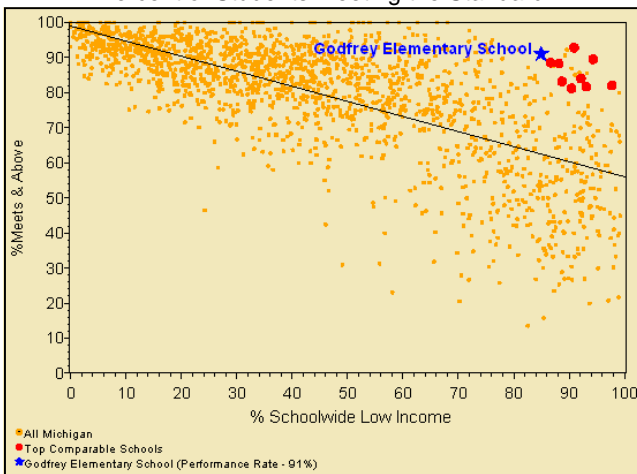
Godfrey Elementary School Godfrey-Lee Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

The School

Godfrey Elementary School, which serves 312 third- through fifth-grade students, is one of two elementary schools in the Godfrey-Lee Public Schools (1,595 students). Godfrey's student population is 54.8% Hispanic, 27.9% White, 16.0% African American, 1.0% Native American, and 0.3% Asian. Within this student population, 84.9% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Example: 2006 4th Grade Mathematics
Percent of Students Meeting the Standard



Consistent Higher Performance

Godfrey Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all three tested subject areas: English Language Arts, mathematics, and science. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from Spring 2004 to Fall 2006.

MEAP Performance Trends for Students Exceeding Standards

The scatterplot above shows Godfrey's performance relative to the state based on the percentage of students meeting the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. The Performance Rates listed below are the percentage of students exceeding the standard.

Subject	Spring 2004 Performance		Fall 2005 Performance			Fall 2006 Performance		
	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
English Language Arts	0.0	N/A	3.7	4.7	3.1	13.3	5.0	7.1
Mathematics	48.5	N/A	28.4	30.3	19.2	44.0	25.7	23.5
Science	N/A	32.1	N/A	N/A	29.3	N/A	N/A	36.5



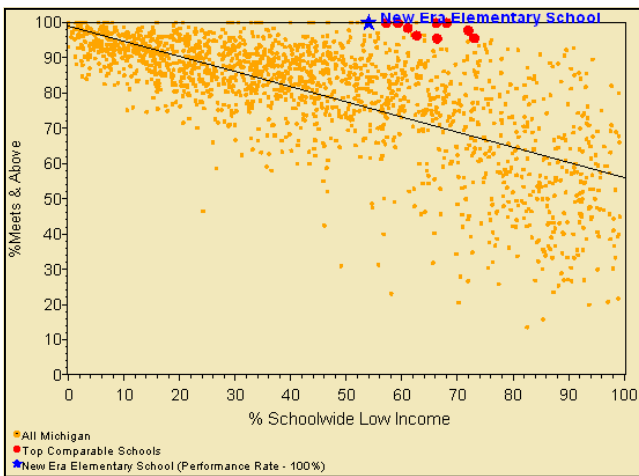
New Era Elementary School Shelby Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

The School

New Era Elementary School, which serves 138 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is one of four elementary schools in Shelby Public Schools (1,785 students). New Era's student population is 76.8% White, 17.4% Hispanic, 4.3% African American, 1.4% Asian, and 0.1% other. Within this student population, 54.1% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2006 4th Grade Mathematics
Percent of Students Meeting the Standard



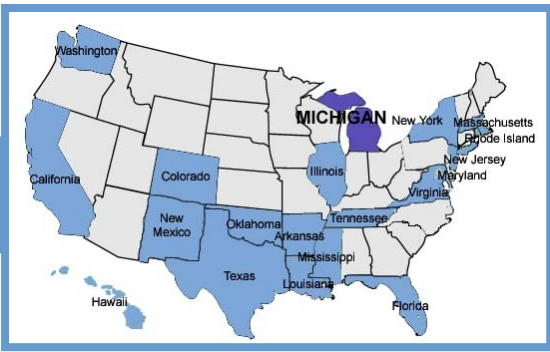
Consistent Higher Performance

New Era Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all three tested subject areas: English Language Arts, mathematics, and science. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from Spring 2004 to Fall 2006.

MEAP Performance Trends for Students Exceeding Standards

The scatterplot above shows New Era's performance relative to the state based on the percentage of students meeting the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. The Performance Rates listed below are the percentage of students exceeding the standard.

Subject	Spring 2004 Performance		Fall 2005 Performance			Fall 2006 Performance		
	4	5	3	4	5	3	4	5
Grade								
English Language Arts	0.0	N/A	25.8	40.0	42.3	29.2	6.9	57.9
Mathematics	42.3	N/A	90.3	75.0	92.3	66.7	65.5	100.0
Science	N/A	100.0	N/A	N/A	42.3	N/A	N/A	100.0



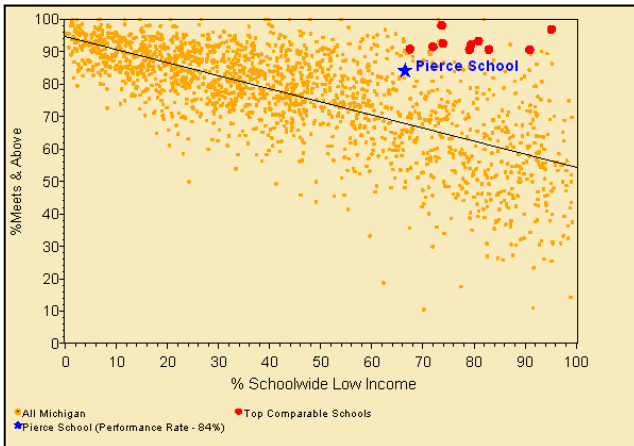
Pierce Elementary School Flint Community Schools

Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

The School

Pierce Elementary School, which serves 534 kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is 1 of 25 elementary schools in the Flint Community Schools (18,081 students). Pierce's student population is 78.7% African American, 17.4% White, 3.0% Hispanic, and 0.2% Asian. Within this student population, 66.5% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Example: 2006 3rd Grade English Language Arts
Percent of Students Meeting the Standard



Consistent Higher Performance

Pierce Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in English Language Arts, science, and social studies. The analysis included all third- through sixth-grade achievement data from Spring 2004 to Fall 2006.

MEAP Performance Trends for Students Exceeding Standards

The scatterplot above shows Pierce's performance relative to the state based on the percentage of students meeting the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. The Performance Rates listed below are the percentage of students exceeding the standard.

Subject	Spring 2004 Performance		Fall 2005 Performance				Fall 2006 Performance			
	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
English Language Arts	8.5	N/A	9.2	1.5	8.6	17.6	3.9	13.5	14.9	12.7
Science	N/A	36.7	N/A	N/A	21.4	N/A	N/A	N/A	21.6	N/A
Social Studies	N/A	3.8	N/A	N/A	N/A	47.1	N/A	N/A	N/A	33.8



Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute Findings

Based on the Themes of the JFTK Framework

Five organizing themes provided the structure for studying the practices of consistently higher performing schools. The themes are listed below.

1. Curriculum and Academic Goals
2. Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
3. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
4. Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
5. Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

These themes are used below to summarize the findings of this study. The themes represent the broad topics that connect best practices across different school system levels—district, school, and classroom. Together, these themes capture the primary instructional activities undertaken by school systems.

The first theme (Curriculum and Academic Goals) described in the JFTK Best Practice Framework forms the foundation of The Framework. Each of the other four themes rests upon the assumption that there is absolute clarity about what is to be taught and learned by grade level—pre-K-12. Building upon that base, higher performing schools are deliberate about selecting and developing their human resources (Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building) and equipping all staff with evidence-based tools and strategies to deliver the curriculum (Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements). With people, tools, and strategies in place, higher performing schools regularly monitor student progress (Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data). Finally, higher performing schools are quick to respond to student achievement data—recognizing success and intervening or adjusting whenever necessary to ensure all students reach the intended standards (Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment).



Theme One: Curriculum and Academic Goals

"What is Taught and Learned"

This theme focuses on the learning target. What is it that we expect all students to know and be able to do by grade and subject? Consistently higher performing school systems have clear academic targets from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Principals and teachers understand the learning goals and understand that these goals are for all students and are non-negotiable.

- **Districts build upon the state standards to create rigorous district curricula. Pacing guides, benchmark assessments, and aligned instructional resources organize and clarify the curriculum.**
 - Across schools, interviewees reported that they ground their district's written curriculum in the academic objectives of the English Language Arts and Mathematics Grade Content Expectations (GLCEs) and the Michigan Curriculum Framework. However, districts add detail to state standards by creating curricula and supporting materials specifying exactly what should be learned in each grade and subject.

- Teachers explained that curriculum and pacing guides ensure that teachers do not repeat the same topics across grade levels. Observed one teacher from Coolidge Elementary, “I think it is nice having someone say, ‘This is going to be your focus,’ as compared to 15 years ago when I was just given a book and told, ‘Teach whatever you want and as much as you can.’ So I appreciate the focus, and it keeps me focused. So many things are being covered instead of the same thing being covered over and over at each grade level.”
 - Following the pacing guide ensures instructional continuity for highly mobile student populations. The superintendent of Shelby Public Schools noted that many of their students move from school to school within the district frequently, making pacing charts especially important. He explained, “We have kids moving all the time. It may not be the same lesson on the same day, but within a few days, if a child moves, they haven’t missed much.”
 - Districts provide school leaders and teachers with both a pacing guide and a curriculum. However, one superintendent reported that he also gives teachers some freedom to teach the curriculum in different ways. “Basically,” he said, “the idea is to make sure that everything on the pacing guide is taught at the appropriate time, so if a student moves from one elementary to the other, they’re not going to be too far out of place. But you still have to acknowledge that some teachers are going to teach things a little bit differently, and you have to let them have that little bit of freedom to do that as long as they know this assessment piece is where they have to get to.”
 - Large school districts provide curriculum coordinators to facilitate the curriculum development, alignment, and implementation process. In one district, the district curriculum staff provided much-needed stability and continuity in the midst of recent turnover in district leadership. The current superintendent is the sixth person to occupy the job in the last five years. Noted the superintendent, “The central office curriculum staff has been pretty consistent. So, in times of tumult, the course of the district has been set by the central office curriculum coordinators looking at student data, determining those areas where we have deficits, and then deciding what we are going to do to make up for those areas.”
 - Small, rural districts often turn to outside education service providers to help with curriculum development. These districts often lack the resources to employ full-time curriculum coordinators. Interviewees from small districts reported that they use a curriculum developed by their Intermediate School District. Each county in Michigan has an Intermediate School District (ISD), which provides curriculum materials, professional development, and other services and support to local school districts. The superintendent of Godfrey-Lee Public Schools described their ISD’s curriculum as “very, very helpful; very complete; and it helps us know when and how to teach every standard.” Teachers at Godfrey Elementary meet at the beginning of each year in grade-level teams, review the curriculum, and then develop their own pacing guides.
- **District-wide vertical teams of teachers and administrators, from pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) through twelfth grade, work together to align the curriculum based on state standards and student performance data.**
 - Even Pre-K through second-grade teachers, whose students do not take state tests, work to align their curriculum with state standards to ensure that their students will have the skills and knowledge necessary for success in higher grades. An administrator at Godfrey-Lee Public Schools explained, “We have a pre-K through second-grade campus and a third- through fifth-grade campus. In the past, the teachers in the Pre-K to second-grade building felt that they didn’t have to deal with the MEAP, even though they are very standards-based and go for mastery learning. When the second-grade teachers sat down after the first third-grade test and looked at the released items, they were shocked. They asked, ‘Why did our kids miss that? They know that!’ It was how the question was worded and the

vocabulary used in the question that confused students. It was such an eye-opener for the teachers. Now, they've changed their pre-K to second-grade curriculum and instruction based on looking at the released MEAP tests for higher grades."

- One district has developed a pre-K through Grade 12 alignment task force, made up of teachers from each grade level, principals, and district administrators. The task force meets periodically to develop common beliefs and practices for teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessments. For example, the task force selects formative assessment instruments aligned with state standards for all grade levels. The teachers and school administrators then take these ideas back to their school to solicit feedback. The task force then meets again to make further revisions. The task force focuses on one core subject area per academic year. During the 2006-07 school year, they focused on revising the English Language Arts curriculum, instructional practices and programs, and assessment instruments.
- The principal at Pierce Elementary in Flint said that her school looks at the teaching of each standard as a three-step, three-year cycle, beginning with introducing the standard, then teaching mastery, and finally enriching the student's understanding of the standard. She observed, "One of the things we've done is to, as a total staff, look at the standards and say, 'At what grade level are we going to introduce this concept, at what grade level will we teach mastery of that concept, at what grade level will we work on enrichment of this concept?' We'll make sure that all of the kids are introduced to a particular standard in second grade, we'll make sure they all know it by third grade, and then we'll provide enrichment by fourth grade."
- District and school leaders explained that new, more rigorous state graduation standards recently began influencing curriculum development in the lower grade levels. Elementary and middle schools align their curriculum and instructional practices to prepare students for the increased challenges awaiting them in high school. In 2006, Michigan adopted a new set of high school graduation requirements, known as the Michigan Merit Curriculum. In the past, individual districts determined most graduation requirements for their students. However, beginning with students entering ninth grade in 2007, high school graduates must complete four years of mathematics, including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II; four years of English Language Arts; three years of Science, including Biology and either Physics or Chemistry; and three years of Social Studies, including a half-year each of Civics, Economics, U.S. History & Geography, and World History & Geography. One superintendent observed, "We've found that the new curriculum will make a huge difference for us, not only at the high school level but for the kids coming up through the elementary and middle schools. We need parents to understand in elementary and middle school that we are going to have to intensify what we do, because all kids will be required to pass Algebra I and II, take lab science courses, etc. It is a rigorous curriculum ... one of the more rigorous in the country."

▪ **Curriculum revision is continuous and results from collaboration between district staff, school administrators, and teachers.**

- District and school leaders work hard to keep teachers engaged with the curriculum development, implementation, and revision cycle, ensuring that teachers have a deep familiarity with the curriculum. Observed one superintendent, "The whole revision process revolves around the staff doing it, facilitated by an administrator; the staff has to make revisions happen. They are teaching it. They see the benchmark assessment results right away. ... But unless an administrator is there making them accountable you'll never have the assessment piece followed through to changing the curriculum. So the administrator has to make that follow-up happen."

- The principal of Barkell Elementary in Hancock Public Schools explained that the district curriculum is “always in transition.” The principals and the school improvement team meet regularly to discuss curriculum issues and explore ways to fine-tune the curriculum to better meet student needs. The principal then takes these revisions to the district curriculum committee, which meets monthly to approve curriculum changes.
- Teachers reported that they meet throughout the year to review particular content areas and modify curriculum and pacing guides as needed. One teacher noted that, although her school and district re-examines all subject areas annually, her school focuses extra time on one core subject each year. That subject, identified through assessment data and other indicators, receives extra attention when educators meet to modify the curriculum. “This year,” she explained, “we focused on writing, and we think we made some progress with the writing curriculum. So now we’re thinking, ‘What can we do to improve the reading curriculum?’”
- **District and school leaders work closely with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to develop and implement school improvement plans.**
 - The school improvement plan can help organize and focus a school’s efforts to increase student achievement. One principal noted that their school improvement plan is a “living breathing document that we use as often as we can during the course of the year. Everything, especially the curriculum, needs to be aligned to the school improvement plan.”
 - All the stakeholders in the Flint Community Schools worked hard in recent years to improve the district’s academic performance. Administrators, teachers, parents and community members collaborated to develop school improvement plans for each school in the district. Noted the superintendent, “I think what’s spurred our school district is that roughly five years ago, 21 out of our 30 elementary schools had been identified as needing improvement, so there was a complete overhaul from the district level about what is going on in the schools. There was a big emphasis on school improvement plans, having those plans reviewed, and making sure that there were teachers, parents, and community people involved in that process.”
 - One superintendent noted that, as part of their school improvement plan development process, each school receives a peer review. Administrators at other elementary schools, as well as district staff, read the plans and offer feedback. Peer review is a learning process for the school and district staff alike, the superintendent reported. Everyone in the district learns about the problems and concerns identified at the school level, and district curriculum coordinators understand how to help each of those schools meet student needs through professional development, curriculum development, and other initiatives.



Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

"Selecting and Developing Leaders and Teachers"

This second theme focuses on the selection and development of a school system's most precious commodity—people. Once the academic goals of the system are clear, the leaders and teachers are selected and given professional development opportunities to make these goals a reality for every learner in the system.

- **Scheduled teacher collaboration time is used to refine and revise curriculum, develop assessments, and share instructional strategies and practices. Teachers meet in both grade-level and subject-area teams.**
 - All interviewees reported that teachers have time during the workday to meet with their colleagues. This allows them to align their classroom instruction vertically, across grade levels, and horizontally, across subject areas. For example, a few years ago at Godfrey Elementary, teachers examined MEAP and benchmark testing results and realized that their students were not developing adequate writing skills. Third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers began holding team meetings with kindergarten, first-, and second-grade teachers to ensure that they were using the same language across grade levels to teach writing skills and concepts. They also held grade-level meetings in which teachers graded writing papers together using a new scoring rubric developed for the entire school. The purpose of the exercise was to ensure that all teachers were using consistent scoring criteria. One teacher at the school observed that strong vertical teams were a major factor in the school's success. "As a third-grade teacher," she said, "we go to K-2 and set up our writing curriculum based on what needed to happen to get them ready for third grade. The same kind of talk amongst everyone helps get us on the same page."
 - Core subject-area teachers often meet while students participate in physical education and art classes, often referred to as "specials." At Coolidge Elementary, collaboration among core subject-area teachers occurs during 45-minute sessions twice a week. While students take specials, teachers meet with their grade-level team, the special education intervention teacher, and their building instructional coach. At Pierce Elementary, grade-level meetings occur once a week, also when students are participating in specials. In addition to scheduled planning meetings, a teacher from Pierce noted that grade-level teams eat lunch together nearly every day, and some grade level teams meet twice a week after school on their own time. The teacher noted, "We have three teachers per grade, and we really like the grade-level meetings. We bring examples of student work and then we score them together and discuss their scoring. We also discuss other things, such as where we are on their pacing charts."
 - The principal of New Era noted that, in addition to professional development days, the school's curriculum coordinator covers classes when grade-level teams feel the need to meet and discuss a particular issue related to teaching and learning.
- **Districts "grow their own" school leaders by asking promising internal candidates to apply for open administrative positions. District and school administrators encourage teachers who display administrative potential to engage in leadership activities.**
 - District leaders ask principals to encourage their strongest teachers to seek out opportunities in administration, sometimes by letting teachers "try out" an administrative role for short periods of time. As one superintendent explained, "We've found that good teachers generally make good administrators. Sometimes a principal or an assistant principal may have to

be out of their office for a period of time due to illness, and our teacher contracts allow an interested teacher to fill in for the administrator for a while so that they can get a feel for the job and decide whether or not they want to pursue that.”

- Districts often prefer to promote from within because new principals will start the job with a support network already in place. The superintendent of Flint Community Schools noted that many new principals have already worked as an assistant principal under someone in the district. He observed, “Support for new building leadership comes in part from the fact that you worked under a practicing principal and learned a little bit of what the ropes are. It is nothing like the actual job, but you get a taste and that ends up being a support system for you because generally whoever you worked under as an assistant principal, that is who you call when you need advice.”
 - The superintendent of Godfrey-Lee Public Schools noted that their Intermediate School District holds leadership academies for aspiring principals, so that they can learn more about the skills needed to be a good administrator. Principals encourage high-performing teachers to attend these academies.
- **The district offers new principals a variety of formal and informal mentorship, peer support, and networking opportunities.**
 - In larger districts with a sizeable pool of veteran principals, the district assigns a mentor to each new principal. According to the principal of Pierce Elementary, “Flint Community Schools prides itself on making sure there is somebody there to help you through that first year, which can be challenging. With the mentors, you don’t feel like you are left out there. You can call somebody or network about how things are done.”
 - Even smaller districts, with a smaller network of principals, work to make sure that new principals can turn to their peers for advice and support. New principals may not automatically receive a mentor, but the district will assign a mentor to those who request one. Noted the superintendent for Shelby Public Schools, “As far as our new principals, they have the opportunity to have a mentor, somebody they are comfortable to work with and ask questions and so forth. Then I always make myself available, being that we are a smaller district, so I don’t have that many principals. When I have somebody who is new I say, ‘If you have any questions, give me a call.’ I’ll help them out with different things.”
 - Beyond formal mentoring programs, principals also have the opportunity to learn from their peers by participating in local, regional, and state principals’ associations. The superintendent of Hancock Public Schools, another small district, said that he encourages their principals to get involved with their local principals’ association and attend the association’s monthly round table principal meetings. Explained another principal, “We have a principal roundtable once a month where all the principals get together and have lunch. We take turns on who organizes it, and we bring in speakers and keep each other up-to-date on new issues. It is also a networking opportunity. We maintain a listserv with everyone’s email and phone numbers. I consider all the local elementary principals to be my mentors. I know that I can just call somebody or send an email to the listserv and ask ‘Hey, how are you handling this?’ I’ll have a bunch of replies come to me.”
 - **Districts provide a variety of professional development opportunities for new and veteran principals. Professional development opportunities are ongoing and not reserved only for struggling schools or administrators.**
 - One superintendent noted that the county’s Intermediate School District conducts a yearly leadership academy for principals which all principals in the district are encouraged to attend. The leadership academies focus on the development of the curriculum and on other topics related to school improvement.

- Another district offers periodic leadership academies, twice a month after school, where groups of principals discuss a variety of management topics. The purpose of the academies is to encourage principals to work together towards developing particular leadership skill sets. In addition, the district offers study groups for new administrators during which participants read and discuss materials related to curriculum and instruction. Explained the superintendent, “We take a two-pronged approach: there are management areas you need to know, and there are instructional pieces that you need to know.”
- In the Flint Community Schools, which had struggled with poor student performance in the past, providing more frequent, higher quality professional development opportunities for principals was an important strategy in the district’s improvement plan. Much of this new professional development involved one-on-one coaching and mentoring for principals at struggling schools. According to the superintendent, “We made a big investment in building leadership. We had coaches for our building principals, using Title I dollars and Title IIa dollars that brought successful past building leaders to work with principals one-on-one about 12 hours per month. In addition to that, we pulled people together, particularly the folks in the high-needs, high-priority schools, every two months for leadership forums. By the year before last, all of the buildings made AYP.”
- **The teacher selection process results in new staff members who are well-matched and highly committed to school goals.**
 - All principals said that, when screening resumes and interviewing candidates, their first priority is finding teachers who are a good fit for the campus. The principal of New Era Elementary explained that he interviews each teacher candidate for at least 90 minutes. He devotes the same scrutiny to veteran teachers trying to transfer to his campus as he does to novice teachers applying for their first teaching job. “The challenge for our building next year,” he explained, “is that we are getting two new staff people, and we haven’t had any new people for a while. The new teachers are veteran teachers coming from another building, but I still made sure that they passed my test for our building environment. It was important to know who they are, what they have done with kids, what their strengths are, and whether they are going to add to that family feeling we have in our building.”
 - Noting that principals in Flint Public Schools do not have the final say over teacher selection and placement, the principal of Pierce said that she makes sure to maintain a good relationship with the district’s Human Resources department. The Human Resources department makes final staffing decisions for each school in the district. She explained, “In Flint, it helps to have a good relationship with HR people, because we can go to them and say, ‘This is Pierce. This is how we do things. We know you have to place somebody here, but we’d sure like to be able to talk to one or two.’ In most cases we’re not able to do that, but they will at least call you and say, ‘We have this person in mind.’ ... I’ll call the candidate’s principal and ask for feedback. Then, I’ll call HR back and tell them my opinion. That networking process has worked for me.”
 - The superintendent of Hancock Public Schools noted that his school uses a collaborative process for hiring principals and teachers. For example, when hiring a science teacher, the district always asks science teachers to participate in the interview. He observed, “I have found that the current teachers are even pickier than I am, and they can get into some issues that I would not have thought about as a principal or a superintendent. ... The teachers now feel like they have a bigger stake in the selection and hiring process.” Teachers also participate in interviews with prospective principals and volunteer to screen resumes.

- **Support systems, such as mentorship and professional development opportunities, help teachers to develop effective instructional practices.**
 - Large urban districts such as Flint Public Schools hire new teachers each year; so, formal mentoring programs have become an engrained part of school and district policy. Teachers at Flint who are interested in becoming mentors must apply to the district curriculum director, who then selects and trains mentors. Explained the principal of Coolidge Elementary, “With new teachers, we assign them a mentor, and that mentor will work with them throughout the course of the year. Every time there is a new person, someone will embrace them and bring them in to doing everything the Coolidge way. ... It is something that we have to do, because we are getting new people constantly.”
 - In smaller districts with low teacher turnover, mentoring programs are less formal. When there is no formal mentoring program, grade-level teams provide assistance to new teachers, and the principal closely monitors and supports new teachers. According to the principal of Barkell Elementary, “It is an informal process because we are so small. If someone says that they need a mentor, volunteers come forward, and I try to match them up, based on grade-level and personality. We do have a close relationship with our Intermediate School District [ISD], and they put on workshops for the teacher mentors, so that’s where they get their training.”
 - Large districts draw on a variety of instructional and content-area experts to build teacher capacity. In Flint Public Schools, curriculum coaches (known as stewards) offer teachers assistance with curriculum development and implementation. The district employs one steward for each core content area (math, science, social studies, and language arts). The stewards provide professional development opportunities and instructional resources, such as new textbooks. In addition, each school in Flint houses an instructional coach, who works with teachers as needed to ensure that evidence-based teaching strategies are implemented effectively in every classroom. The coaches model new lessons for classroom teachers.
 - Small school districts, with fewer in-house professional development resources, work with outside organizations such as their ISD to provide teacher training. Barkell Elementary, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, noted that they rely on their ISD, as well as online professional development, because they are located so far away from major cities. Statewide trainings, for example, are held in Lansing, a nine-hour drive away. Hiring a professional development provider to travel to the region is also costly. As a result, one teacher noted, “We have a lot of small districts up here and our ISD is instrumental in getting us materials and housing things and providing a lot of PD for the whole area.”

- **Constant collaboration helps teachers improve their instructional practices.**
 - Teachers constantly share ideas and concerns about their teaching. One superintendent noted, “The teachers are getting to the point that, instead of being their own individual entity, they’re now becoming a community where they’ll sit down and talk. ‘I’m doing this, and this works or this doesn’t work; what did you do?’ We kind of opened the doors, because just a matter of ten years ago, we were all kind of independent contractors as classroom teachers, whereas today it is more like a community where we are learning to work together. So if we’ve got five of us here at this table, you may do a wonderful job working something at trigonometry, but I’m having a rough time delivering it to the kids. But, I’m working with quadratic equations better than you. We can share that information; therefore, we’ve got a better opportunity to be able to teach something to the kids. We are sharing our scripts.”
 - At some schools, instead of every teacher teaching every subject, grade-level teachers divide the subjects amongst themselves. Students move between classrooms and teachers

over the course of the week. Rather than teaching all subjects to the same group of students, teachers specialize in a smaller number of content areas. One teacher observed that she likes this system because it encourages teacher collaboration. Teachers must work together to coordinate instructional practices across subject areas. She explained, “In English Language Arts, we taught students how to write a research paper at the same time that the science teachers had assigned students to write research papers about their science fair project. With the blocking, we just had to give up ownership over every subject. This is a big philosophy change. Plus, teachers are now teaching either in their major or their passion. ... What a difference when you have someone with a math major presenting math material! I've seen a lot more enthusiasm and more excitement and passion out of the teachers since we've gone to this system.”



Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

“The Right Stuff—Time and Tools”

This theme focuses on the “things” that higher performing school systems use—the arrangement of time, the instructional resources and materials, technology, etc. Strong instructional leaders and highly qualified teachers need evidence-based tools and resources to reach high standards with every learner.

- **Instructional programs are tightly aligned with learning standards.**
 - When choosing instructional programs that align tightly with state standards, district and school administrators solicit input from teachers and other stakeholders. In the Godfrey-Lee Public Schools, instructional programs, including textbooks, are adopted at the district level as a result of work by grade-level and subject-area teams consisting of teachers and administrators. These groups research related best practices and then select instructional programs that are aligned with state standards. The programs are then presented to a curriculum committee made up of administrators and school board members. Finally, the entire school board votes to decide whether to adopt the program.
 - At Hancock Public Schools, a district curriculum committee made up of a teacher, a counselor, a principal, and two school board members selects instructional programs. The superintendent reported that the committee checks each and every instructional program to ensure that it aligns with state standards.
 - In smaller school districts, the process may be less district-directed, but the alignment of instructional programs with state and district standards is still paramount. The principal of New Era Elementary noted that he gives teachers some leeway in selecting instructional programs, provided that they align with the curriculum and state standards. He explained, “I think some of that creativity in teaching—some of that experience that they’ve had—allows them to find the materials and resources in order to reach those objectives.”
 - When selecting instructional programs, teachers and administrators understand that learning standards, not textbooks, drive instructional planning. One principal noted that if a proposed textbook does not align with the district curriculum, they will put together their own packets of instructional materials rather than purchase a textbook that does not fit the curriculum.

- **Schools adjust instructional time in order to meet students’ learning needs. Administrators and teachers frequently rearrange the school schedule in order to devote additional time to mathematics and literacy skill-building.**
 - Many schools mandate extra, uninterrupted time in the school schedule to devote to mathematics and reading. Barkell Elementary schedules a 90-minute language arts block every morning. Paraprofessionals and Title I aides perform interventions within that block for students who need help, and students with more extensive needs receive an additional half-hour of help in the afternoon.
 - Similarly, the superintendent of Flint Public Schools explained that over the last seven years, the district has consistently allocated two and one-half hours a day for literacy instruction in all their elementary schools. During this literacy block, the district encourages teachers to teach reading and writing skills using textbooks in core content areas such as science and social studies.
 - Data drive adjustments to instructional time. One year, after receiving state assessment data and realizing that their students were not as strong in reading as they needed to be, Godfrey Elementary decided to devote an extra, uninterrupted hour of time every day to reading instruction. According to the principal, this change has forced teachers and administrators to, “get creative with our schedules and our specials” in order to increase reading instruction without taking time away from other core subject areas.

- **Flexible grouping arrangements allow teachers to differentiate instruction without “tracking” students.**
 - In recent years, many schools eliminated ability grouping in all or some core subject areas. One principal noted that he eliminated ability grouping in mathematics approximately two years ago, and “the evidence has been nothing but positive.” The move away from ability grouping, he reported, resulted in higher expectations for all students.
 - One school does group students by ability for reading instruction, but student groupings are based on results of benchmark assessments administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. The groupings are very flexible and fluid, with students re-tested every few weeks to see if the groups should change.
 - A teacher at Coolidge Elementary School uses technology, namely a mobile computer lab with laptops for each student, to differentiate instruction. She explained, “We use the Harcourt math textbook series. Last year, I used to pull our mobile computer lab into the classroom and let the kids work independently, because Harcourt had a website that they could go to and work independently, at their own level. The kids loved that. I would assign a lesson and after they mastered that, they could move on to the next level.”
 - New Era Elementary School uses paraprofessionals to staff their early intervention reading program. Paraprofessionals go into kindergarten, first, and second-grade classrooms for 45 minutes to an hour each day, and during that time the class breaks into three smaller groups of no more than six students each. The student groupings are based on the specific reading skills students need to improve, rather than students’ overall reading ability. According to the principal, since instituting the reading intervention program, the school’s reading scores have gone up, and the number of students requiring special education placement has gone down.



Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

"Knowing the Learners and the Numbers"

After clearly identifying what is to be taught and learned by grade and subject and ensuring that the schools are equipped with the staff and the tools to successfully deliver the curriculum, the school system then asks and answers an important question: "How are we going to know if students learned what we said they would learn?"

- **Principals conduct regular walk-through observations to monitor and informally evaluate instruction and curriculum delivery. These observations serve as a supplement to monitoring assessment data.**
 - Regular visits to classrooms create a school culture where observations by principals and fellow teachers are viewed as normal, everyday parts of the classroom routine. The principal of New Era Elementary conducts regular classroom walk-throughs and also encourages teachers to invite him to their classroom. He explained, "I try to make sure that the students and the teachers don't think anything of the fact that I'm in their classroom. In fact, I want them to call down to the office, and—if I'm not there—find me and get me in there, when they are doing something that they really want me to see."
 - One principal noted that she does not base teacher evaluations on only one or two classroom observations, because that might make teachers too nervous on the days when she visits their class. Instead, she tries to visit classrooms "all the time." She noted that much of her monitoring and evaluation is informal in nature, including daily verbal feedback based on her observations.
 - The principal of Godfrey Elementary explained that she uses different evaluation techniques for teachers, depending on their proficiency. With teachers who have proven to be successful in previous years, the principal skips classroom observations and instead sits down with that teacher and asks, "What do you want to work on?" The principal and teacher develop a plan and timeline together. The plan may include professional development sessions, observations of other teachers, or independent study. The teacher checks in with the principal periodically to report on his or her progress. Groups of teachers may also choose to work together to develop a particular set of skills. Struggling or underperforming teachers receive a more formal evaluation from the principal and develop detailed plans for improvement in needed areas.
- **School administrators and teachers use multiple assessments to track student progress and identify student learning needs.**
 - Benchmark assessments, as well as state and standardized testing results, are integral and powerful parts of the teaching and learning process. For example, one school uses a formative assessment program called the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI). Teachers administer the exam to all students at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year and receive feedback about the students' reading levels. Teachers can chart their students' progress over the course of the year. Teachers often share the information with parents. In addition, the school librarian keeps a notebook listing each student's scores, so if a student comes in to the library, the librarian can select books appropriate for the student's reading level. The principal explained, "If kids are reading books that are at their level, they are going to increase their reading level more readily. The kids really like it. They are always looking to see if their scores have improved. The parents like it, because we have book fairs, and they can look for books at their kid's level."

- Several schools at the Michigan Best Practice Institute reported using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessments. The DIBELS measures early literacy development. The assessments are designed to be short fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of pre-reading and early reading skills. The principal at one school reported that they administer the DIBELS assessments three times a year. The school's Title I director looks at the assessment data to select students for targeted, small group literacy interventions.
- Other formalized assessments used to monitor student performance include Accelerated Reader and Accelerated Math, SuccessMaker, the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), and norm-referenced tests such as the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the Iowa tests.
- **School administrators and teachers examine and analyze student data to inform instructional practices.**
 - When planning ways to revise curriculum and instructional practices, teachers and school leaders discuss assessment results openly and honestly. At Godfrey Elementary, students are tested at the beginning and the end of the school year in mathematics and language arts, using the MAP benchmark assessment. One teacher reported, "Teachers get together and discuss the writing at staff meetings amongst the grade levels, and we look for the topics and skills that we think students need more of. ... This year we received the student writing samples along with the grades, which was really good. It will help us get ready for next year, because the test results show us the student's reading level and the skills they are deficient in."
 - School leaders encourage teachers to examine and learn from student assessment data. According to one Coolidge Elementary teacher, "The principal gets us together in the spring. We look at our strengths and weaknesses and then decide what our focus is going to be for the following year. We have to develop a new plan before we can leave school at the end of the year, so we can start focusing on whatever we need. We have to have grade-level meetings, and then we meet with the fourth and sixth-grade teachers and talk about the things we need. ... Our focus next year will be on writing, because our scores weren't that high, so writing will be addressed in every subject area."
 - One school employs a curriculum resource teacher who focuses on analyzing assessment data. A teacher reported that the school launched a new literacy initiative after this teacher analyzed their students' scores on benchmark assessments and realized that they were somewhat below grade-level. They decided to adjust their schedule to allow additional time for literacy instruction. "At the beginning of each year, our curriculum resource teacher meets with each grade-level team. He tries to identify the weak areas and then, as a group, we talk about what we can do, and then we have a school improvement team that looks at broader school goals and how we can better use our resources that way."
 - Data from benchmark assessments can help teachers in different grade levels coordinate instruction from year to year. At Hancock Elementary, the Title I coordinator pulls information from benchmark assessments such as the DIBELS and distributes it to teachers during grade-level team meetings. The school also assembles "child study teams" of teachers and administrators who discuss the progress of individual students receiving extra interventions. At the end of the year, the child study team forwards their reports to each student's teachers for the following school year. Those teachers study the reports and see what interventions have been tried with particular students and understand which interventions have worked for that student and which have not.
 - One teacher noted that her grade-level team uses a benchmark assessment program to perform an inventory of student knowledge and skill at the beginning of the year, and then

she repeats the inventory during the middle and then at the end of the year to track student progress. They keep all three scores and pass that information to the teachers in the next following grade level.



Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

"Ensuring All Children Learn"

The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance: "What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and skills we said they would learn?" Higher performing school systems have *pyramids of intervention* that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted.

- **Teachers and school leaders work together to provide timely interventions and prevent students from falling too far behind. Teachers monitor the progress of each individual child, rather than looking only at the progress of their class as a whole, and differentiate instruction within the classroom.**
 - Interviewees emphasized the importance of early interventions for struggling students. One teacher noted that federal accountability requirements under No Child Left Behind provide an extra incentive for early intervention. She observed, "We do preemptive strikes. If we see an area that is a problem, we try to make changes in curriculum, with training for staff, and interventions for kids to make sure that we don't get caught by the sub-group part of AYP."
 - According to the superintendent of Shelby Public Schools, in the first couple of years of elementary school, schools organize early interventions in language arts whenever they see students who are falling behind in basic literacy skill development. As one teacher explained, "We look at the DIBELS and other assessment results and teacher recommendations. We look at all students to make sure that we aren't missing anyone. This is a prevention strategy to avoid placing students in special education. We also assess students at the end of pre-K, so we will know where they will be when they walk into kindergarten. For those who we don't have for pre-K, we do a readiness assessment when they come into kindergarten."
 - A teacher at Pierce Elementary said that she uses the instant feedback available from Accelerated Reading and Accelerated Math assessments to determine when she needs to adjust instruction. She also uses frequent, brief pop quizzes in math to check students' understanding of the material. If the entire class performs poorly on the quiz, she re-teaches the concepts.
 - Teachers and administrators meet regularly to identify and monitor struggling students. A teacher at one school reported that teachers use their weekly grade level meetings to talk about individual struggling students. She explained, "We share ideas about what we are doing to make his or her academic experience more successful."
 - One principal said that he encourages teachers to think of each student as an individual learner. He explained, "I think the old way of doing things is to teach a lesson to the whole class, and we are moving away from that. Now we say to a teacher, 'Here is the assessment for each individual child; this child needs this very specific intervention.' Then they try that intervention. If it doesn't work out, we give them very narrowly targeted one-on-one interventions, and then we monitor whether or not they are making progress."

- Many teachers reported using paraprofessionals or intervention teachers to divide classes into smaller groups in order to give students more one-on-one attention.
- **Schools offer tutoring and other study supports throughout the school day, as well as before and after school, for students in need of additional assistance.**
 - Flint Community Schools uses Title I funds to provide an extended school day for struggling students. Special education and Title I teachers work after school with students identified as “high risk” by the DIBELS assessments.
 - In Hancock Public Schools, a local foundation pays for tutors who are available after school. A certified teacher manages the program and oversees the tutoring. Teachers may recommend a student for tutoring, or the student can choose to attend on their own. Volunteer tutors from nearby universities also provide tutoring.
 - Godfrey-Lee Public Schools uses the summer vacation to help struggling students improve their literacy skills. Through a partnership with nearby Grand Valley University, graduate students pursuing Master’s Degrees in reading instruction provide individualized instruction to K-5 students.
 - One principal observed that teachers and administrators at his school try to bring parents into the process early. Teachers work with parents to develop academic improvement plans for struggling students. The plan suggests extra activities that parents and students can work on at home, and teachers offer parents books and other materials to help them complete the activities.
- **Struggling teachers receive both formal and informal support. Principals remain positive, while still working closely with the struggling teacher to develop an improvement plan.**
 - Principals generally look for every opportunity to help struggling teachers improve. According to one principal, “You give them three to four weeks to improve, and then go to them and ask, ‘What can we do?’ You meet with them and come up with a plan and start with small steps: ‘Let’s see if you can accomplish this in the next two or three weeks.’ Then you offer choices, such as letting them go observe classes taught by higher performing teachers. You keep praising them, and you keep trying to focus on the good things that they are doing, in order to build their confidence. You visit their classrooms frequently and tell them in advance when you will be doing their formal evaluation.”
 - Principals often assign instructional coaches to work closely with struggling teachers. The principal at Coolidge Elementary noted that the instructional coach has more time than the principal does to concentrate on observing teachers and helping them develop strategies for improvement.
 - One principal noted that when he identifies a teacher as struggling, he will match them with a successful colleague at the same grade level. He tries to match teachers who are already friendly, in order to keep things “low-key and positive.” He encourages the pairs to work together informally and develops a formal assistance plan only if the teacher continues to struggle.
 - Principals also encourage teachers to model successful instructional practices for their colleagues. A principal explained, “Sometimes during a walk-through, I’ll see a cool practice that somebody is doing, so at the next staff meeting I’ll ask them to share what they are doing or demonstrate what they are doing.”



Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute Conclusion

Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework

The NCEA analysis identified five consistently higher performing elementary schools in Michigan. District, school, and classroom representatives from each school participated in a series of five focus groups organized by the themes of The JFTK Best Practice Framework. Summaries of the findings of those focus groups are presented below by theme.

The Findings

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Districts build upon state standards to create rigorous district curricula. Pacing guides, benchmark assessments, and aligned instructional resources organize and clarify the curriculum. District-wide vertical teams of teachers and administrators work together to align the curriculum based on state standards and student performance data. Curriculum revision is continuous and is the result of collaboration between district staff, school administrators, and teachers. District and school leaders work closely with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to develop and implement school improvement plans.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Teachers use scheduled collaboration time to refine and revise the curriculum, develop assessments, and share instructional strategies and practices. Districts “grow their own” school leaders by asking promising internal candidates to apply for open administrative positions and encouraging teachers to engage in leadership activities. The teacher selection process results in new staff members who are well-matched and highly committed to school goals. Districts offer new principals and teachers a variety of formal and informal mentorship, peer support, networking opportunities, and ongoing professional development.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Instructional programs are tightly aligned with learning standards. Schools adjust instructional time in order to meet students’ learning needs and frequently rearrange the school schedule in order to devote additional time to mathematics and literacy skill-building. Flexible grouping arrangements allow teachers to differentiate instruction without “tracking” students.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Principals conduct regular walk-through observations to monitor and informally evaluate instruction and curriculum delivery. Teachers use multiple assessments to track student progress and identify student learning needs. School administrators and teachers examine and analyze student data to inform instructional practices.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

Teachers and school leaders work together to provide timely interventions and prevent students from falling too far behind. Teachers monitor the progress of each individual child and differentiate instruction within the classroom. Schools supplement classroom teacher efforts by offering tutoring and other study supports throughout the school day, as well as after school, for students in need of additional assistance. Struggling teachers receive both formal and informal support, including principals working closely with them to develop improvement plans.